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Consumption of Care and Intergenerational Relations in the Irish Context

Conlon, C., Timonen, V., Scharf, T., & Carney, G. (2014). Consumption of Care and Intergenerational Relations in the Irish Context. *Families, Relationships and Societies*, 3(1), 139-142.
<https://doi.org/10.1332/204674313X13808738507523>

Published in:
Families, Relationships and Societies

Document Version:
Peer reviewed version

Queen's University Belfast - Research Portal:
[Link to publication record in Queen's University Belfast Research Portal](#)

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This is a post-peer-review, pre-copy edited version of an article published in Families, Relationships and Societies. The definitive publisher-authenticated version Conlon, C., Timonen, V., Scharf, T & Carney, G 2014, 'Consumption of Care and Intergenerational Relations in the Irish Context' Families, Relationships and Societies, vol 3, no. 1, pp. 139-142. is available online at:

<http://qub.library.ingentaconnect.com/search/article?option1=title&value1=Consumption+of+Care+and+Intergenerational+Relations+in+the+Irish+Context&pageSize=10&index=1>- See more at: http://www.policypress.co.uk/info_archiving.asp?#sthash.FpiiOQl6.dpuf

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Families, Relationships and Societies

Consumption of Care and Intergenerational Relations in the Irish Context

--Manuscript Draft--

Manuscript Number:	FRS-D-13-00038R2
Full Title:	Consumption of Care and Intergenerational Relations in the Irish Context
Article Type:	Open Space contribution
Keywords:	care; intergenerational; ageing; Ireland
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Abstract:	An ageing demographic and changing family practices in Western societies raise the question as to what kind of care landscape will emerge. An Irish study explores practices, experiences and meanings of relations between generations at family and societal levels using constructivist grounded theory. A process of 'generational observing' is found to be reshaping care practices albeit in ways that are contoured by class.
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Consumption of Care and Intergenerational Relations in the Irish Context

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Keywords: care; intergenerational; ageing; Ireland

Intergenerational family relations have been explained using conceptual frameworks of solidarity, conflict and ambivalence (e.g. Luescher and Pillemer, 1998; Bengtson, 2001; Connidis and McMullin, 2005). Interest in intergenerational relations is usually situated within changing demographic trends and evolving family relations in the context of cultural change associated with globalising processes (see e.g. Connidis, 2010). Concerns about population ageing and increasing levels of dependency give rise to consideration of how care needs will be met, particularly in contexts where family has been the main source of elder care. Personal life and family practices are evolving away from a nuclear family model to more diverse family formations though not necessarily any less embedded social relationships (Morgan, 2011; Smart, 2007). These changes and preoccupations raise the question as to what kind of care landscape(s) will emerge in the future (Connidis, 2010).

*Changing Generations*¹ is a qualitative study involving 52 women and 48 men across the age and socio-economic spectra to explore practices, experiences and meanings of solidarity at family and societal levels in contemporary Ireland (Timonen et al, 2013). A legacy of underdevelopment of formal care structures persists in Ireland, reflecting a policy approach that designates (implicitly or explicitly) the family as the place where care should be provided and women as the primary providers of care. Women's role in the workforce in Ireland has expanded considerably over recent decades, challenging a policy premised on women's availability to provide informal care.

Ireland was in deep economic recession when we embarked on research to take a new look at solidarities (or lack of them) practised and expressed by people in diverse locations across the life course. The severe impact of the global recession on Ireland has resulted in high unemployment,

¹ Visit <http://www.sparc.tcd.ie/generations> for more information about this study and the research methodology followed.

1 particularly among the youngest age groups, resurgence of mass emigration of working-age people,
2 and high levels of personal indebtedness. Significant economic upheaval and attendant social,
3 economic and ontological insecurity characterise the context in which we explored the views,
4 practices and exchanges that constitute intergenerational solidarity.
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9 Against this background, we found that strong solidarity is a key feature of relations between family
10 generations in Ireland at this moment. In the face of the severe recession, people across age groups
11 gave accounts of pulling together, helping each other out, and thereby keeping struggling family
12 members afloat. At the societal level, too, generational groups tended to express empathy and
13 support for other age groups and the pressures they were observing them coping with. For example,
14 younger and middle generations viewed older people as deserving of the protections and supports
15 they receive from state resources.
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19 ***Noelle (19, middle socio-economic status, employed):***
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21 [Older people] get the pensions but they work[ed] for it, it is their money. The way I see it,
22 they paid enough money over their life time into the State so they should get something
23 back.
24
25

26 The data reveals a widespread belief that older people have made life-long contributions to Irish
27 society through raising families, building communities and paying taxes and social insurance. There
28 is correspondingly strong support for age-related supports in the form of social transfers and
29 health/care services that protect older people from poverty and enhance their well-being.
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35 Conversely, older people express support for younger age groups. At the family level, older people
36 described observing adult children who struggle to pay mortgages, hold on to jobs and raise families,
37 and voluntarily 'stepping in' to alleviate these pressures. Supports are given according to the
38 resources the older person has. This is either in the form of money, time and 'care labour' such as
39 picking up children from school or child care, and offering to look after grandchildren to reduce
40 childcare costs, cooking meals for family members living in other households, or including items (e.g.
41 nappies) in a weekly shop to reduce the younger families' shopping bills.
42
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45 ***Matt (70, high socio-economic status, retired):***
46

47 That's where a lot of my disposable income is going. I have an unemployed son who has a
48 family and I have a daughter that I had to support. It's my pleasure and my privilege to help
49 my children, but I worry about my son because he has a family.
50
51

52 All age groups demonstrated commitment to the well-being of children and overall the data
53 indicates a strong 'downward orientation' to the generational solidarity people expressed. All
54 generations expressed commitment to ensure that children's life chances are optimised. In this
55 context older people tended to express the view that their adult children understandably prioritise
56 care/time commitments towards their own children, even when this is at the expense of being able
57 to devote time to ageing parents and parents-in-law. The evidence from *Changing Generations*
58 suggests that the expectations, obligation and practices of care provision for older family members
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are being reshaped by a process we call 'generational observing'. This refers to older family members observing the demands on their adult children (the middle generation), in particular the demands of resourcing children, and (re)calibrating their expectations of supports according to what they consider to be the middle generation's capacity to give. In many cases, older family members' expectations of receiving help, support or care from their adult children are set at a low level.

However, socio-economic status² features as key in shaping both expectations and practices regarding the provision of care. Expectations regarding future family care from adult children and their families were particularly low among middle and high socio-economic status older adults whose adult children and children-in-law were in employment. Low expectations regarding family care reflect well-off older adults' observation of the heavy investment of time (and money) by their adult children and children-in-law into their grandchildren, and also the ability to pay for care from private resources. Families with more economic resources can plan to 'contract out' elements of intergenerational solidarity, in particular care of both children and older family members.

The situation of families with lower incomes is markedly different. Participants with limited economic resources describe higher level of need for care among their older generations and greater need for that care to come from direct time and care labour inputs of family members.

The following cross-generational and cross-class quotations exemplify these processes:

Fred (70+, high socio-economic status, retired):

If I needed care? I don't expect it from my children ... No I don't. As I said we have some investments ... for my wife and I, in our minds, they are to pay for whatever care we need for as long as the blooming investments last or how long we last. I planned to look after ourselves.

Alice (65-70, middle socio-economic status, retired):

[My daughter] is very outgoing and she is into different things and she has four children and she is always running and racing and she brings them to the sports, she doesn't have a minute so I wouldn't call on her to do anything you know, unless I was sick and I needed shopping.

Stacey (teenager, low socio-economic status, unemployed/family carer):

I do everything [for my grandmother who has dementia], the washing, the drying, the feeding, the bathing... I have to do everything for her (...) Your family is your family. (...) She is my Nanny, I shouldn't be paid to look after her I feel. (...) when it's your family I feel like it's kind of your duty. ... I love her to bits.

² Occupational status categorisation used by the Central Statistics Office (CSO) of Ireland to classify socio-economic status was selected and re-grouped into the three categories of high, middle and low.

Our findings show that 'generational observing' is reshaping intergenerational family relations so that *caring for* (doing) is being separated out from *caring about* (disposition) but in ways that are contoured by class. In families of high and middle socio-economic status, the older generation expects little from adult children who they perceive as 'very stretched' in meeting extensive demands of careers and raising the next generation. Members of the 'middle' generation accepts this opportunity to invest most of their resources into raising children, and focus on providing emotional support (rather than 'hands-on' help and care) to the older generations. In lower socio-economic groups, interdependencies between generations are more often reflected in the direct provision of care and support. The welfare state context matters too: restricted availability of, and low public expenditure on, formal long-term care is one of the factors driving private expenditure on care by those who can afford it and recourse to family care by those who cannot.

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